



Stacy Carter dictates findings to a voice recognition recorder while performing prosection of a human femoral head in Trumbull's histology lab.

RELATIONSHIP CULTURE

•• Lab works to put humanity in science.

By **JONATHAN DEVIN**

THE LAB. TO believe television medical and crime dramas, it's the place where geeky, slightly anti-social people in white coats hide away in dark, cluttered basements far from the reality of the world around them.

It's no wonder then that Trumbull Laboratories, which provides pathology services for area hospitals, doctors' offices, clinics, and surgery centers, went out of its way to break that image.

Improving the work environment has a direct impact on improving the quality of client care, it seems.

"All of our employees, whether they're on the professional side or the technical side or the clerical side, realize that there's a real live patient behind every specimen," says Norman Hill, executive director of Trumbull Laboratories, which occupies

the 24,000-square-foot second floor of an office building on Wolf River Boulevard in Germantown.

"We've had employee specimens come through here with good and bad news. So

The sprawling lab is a network of airy, open offices with picture windows and nature photography lining the walls. Spartan yet contemporary accents like glass pendant lighting fixtures and bistro tables and chairs fill meeting rooms and break rooms.

when we see a piece of tissue, we recognize that somebody's very concerned and we're the only ones who can tell them the answer."

Trumbull Laboratories was first organized by its namesake, Dr. Merlin Trumbull, in

1947 to work in conjunction with Baptist Hospital in the heart of Memphis' medical district.

In 1998, the lab separated from Baptist, though it continues to do testing for all Memphis-area Baptist hospitals, and moved to a new location on Knight-Arnold Road. Trumbull moved to its current location in 2008, having helped the building's architect design the newer space according to industry standards.

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"Laboratories typically get scrunched

down into small, tight spaces and we wanted to do it a little differently,” says Hill. “It has made for a much more pleasant work environment for our people.”

The immediate vicinity of the lab is filled with current and potential clients as well.

“I think this area is considered to be the new Memphis medical corridor even though technically we’re in Germantown,” Hill says. “There’s a whole host of doctors’ offices right within sight. I really think that Campbell Clinic started that trend, because when they built their new site, a lot of practices followed.”

That includes the Stern Cardiovascular Center, the UT Medical Group, the Sutherland Cardiology Clinic, and the West Clinic.

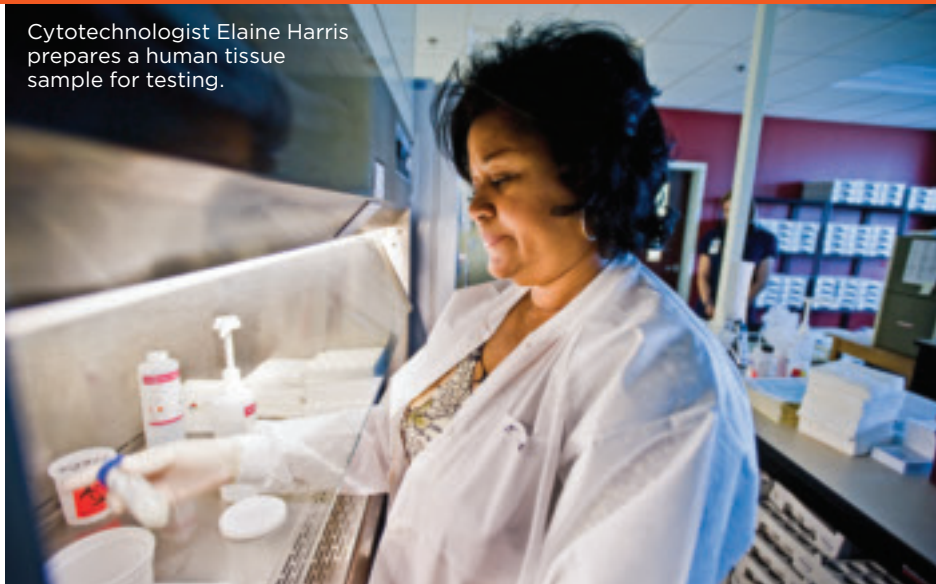
Trumbull employs about 100 people including 14 physicians who officially belong to Pathology Group of the Midsouth (PGM), a separate legal entity under the Medicare system. Their job is to take hundreds of tiny samples of human tissue, preserve them on a slide, and diagnose diseases and disorders at the cellular level — a service that doctors’ offices generally cannot do themselves.

“It would be like a family practice doctor doing orthopedics or dermatology themselves,” says Hill. “Pathology is one more discipline within the field of medicine.”

Dr. Lynn Gayden, director of the Women’s Health Center at Baptist Women’s Hospital, sends Trumbull five to eight biopsies every day.

“We talk to them on a daily basis,” says Gayden. “They call us with the results of ev-

Cytotechnologist Elaine Harris prepares a human tissue sample for testing.



ery biopsy and it’s almost always the next day even if we do studies on Friday. They call us at home or at the office on Saturday. They are extremely responsive to our needs and extremely sensitive to the anxiety that women have waiting for the results.”

A key to the business is the interplay between physicians, their staffers, and the lab, which fields hundreds of phone calls each day.

Over the past 10 years, Hill and Elise McAlexander, Trumbull’s supervisor of the client services department, have transformed their reception staff into a seven-member team of go-to people whose job it is to personally chase down the answer to each question coming in by phone.

“As our relationships grew with clients

throughout the city, it became obvious to Norman and me that we needed our level of service to match the level of care that our pathologists provide,” says McAlexander.

“Now when you call you get a live person, and that person is equipped to answer the question or get the question answered for you without having to transfer you all over the company.”

Client services staffers also meet monthly with doctors’ offices so they can build relationships, which Hill says goes back to the days when Merlin Trumbull built his client base by getting to know those in his profession doctor to doctor.

“We grow our business and maintain our business through relationships,” says Hill, noting that he does a small amount of advertising as public awareness so patients will recognize the name if they should receive a bill from the lab.

The strategy seems to be working. Earlier in 2011 the lab added a new dermatopathologist and will add a cytopathologist in July. The need for new staff has resulted from a relationship with a regional clinical laboratory and an increase in more complicated and time-consuming cases.

Refinements in technologies over the past decade make detecting cancer possible with smaller tissue specimens. Other improvements help pathologists target proper treatment protocols based on patient diagnoses.

“The good news about what we do is that we’re ruling out cancer,” Hill says. “A lot of the diagnoses are negative and that’s a very good report to send to a clinician for a patient.” ❖



Ketura Nolan (left) and Terri Smith set up acute sample tests to look for abnormalities in human genetic material.